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About the author(s)

Sarah Perks is a curator, writer, producer and broadcaster who works across contemporary visual art, film and literature to create major exhibitions, books and films that challenge the dominant narratives of our time. More information at www.sarahperks.co.uk.

Cover image:  *5825 NE 2nd Ave., Miami, FL 33137*, by Eddie Arroyo. 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 71.1 by 91.4 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Spinello Projects, Miami; photograph Eddie Arroyo; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

Whitney Biennial 2019

by Sarah Perks • 19.06.2019

In Ilana Harris-Babou's video *Finishing a Raw Basement* (2017), the artist's mother, Sheila, repeats a line first spoken by the poet Audre Lorde in a conversation with James Baldwin: 'Deep down, I know that dream was never mine'.¹ She is talking about the American dream, but she goes on to clarify that 'it was more of a nightmare'. This sequence perfectly captures the gap between the intention of the curators of the 79th Whitney Biennial – Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley – to create an exhibition 'representative of the complexity of this moment' – and the display they present.² Lorde herself continues, 'And I was out – out – by any construct wherever the power lay'.

It is important to Panetta and Hockley that nobody is left out, which is one of the conceits and major successes of this year's biennial. They have applied due diligence to ensure they are representative and diverse; in the catalogue they articulate at length the process of searching for the artists that define America today, looking in the spaces that 'neither traditional museums nor the marketplace is filling'.³ Although the exhibition has 'no set formula or manual',⁴ it aims to survey, or take the temperature of, the recent work of artists in and of the United States. Where the curators' ambition starts to stretch thin in the display is that they have tried to take the health statistics of an entire nation. Panetta's and Hockley's catalogue introduction is weighed down by the narrative of the current moment's especially turbulent times, although, confusingly, they acknowledge that this has been said of all of the previous editions since 1993. My point is not to deny the reality of the nightmares of 2019, rather to articulate the curatorial trend of addressing the 'interesting' times as a whole, identifiable by the hyper-polished presentation of overwhelmingly socio-political art.⁵

Partly because of this polish, it is a joy to wander through the fifth and sixth floors of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.⁶ The curators have selected a strong and steady seventy-five artists, known names and relative newcomers, side-by-side in a sleek design that privileges sculpture and painting. Scene-stealing sculpture includes Simone Leigh's striking human-scale female bodies **FIG. 1** and Diane Simpson's innovative, almost decorative, formal arrangements **FIG. 2**. Gala Porras-Kim explores the spirit of the ancient oral language Zapotec in stunning connected wall and floor pieces; and Eric N. Mack's remarkable fabric pieces include reference to the work of Alvin Baltrop, who documented the gay

culture of the Christopher Street Pier in the 1970s and 1980s. Jeffrey Gibson's colourful mixed-media banners – 'PEOPLE LIKE US' adorns the chest of a bright Native American-style costume – address the appropriation of Indigenous American culture **FIG. 3.**



Fig. 1 Installation view of the *Whitney Biennial 2019*, showing *Stick*, by Simone Leigh. 2019. (Photograph Ron Amstutz; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

America has been leading the current revolution in figurative painting, and this show is no exception, from Kyle Thurman's delicate portraits to Janiva Ellis's vivid large-scale tableaux **FIG. 4.** Protest and inequality are explicit in Pat Phillips's mural of Black hands and riot vans, displayed behind a wooden fence (*Untitled, Don't Tread On Me*; 2019), and in Kota Ezawa's *National Anthem* (2018), an animation about the protests in 2016 and 2017 against police violence by NFL players, who knelt during the National Anthem. Eddie Arroyo's paintings of the same changing street together produce a visual protest against the gentrification of the Little Haiti area of Miami **FIG. 5.**



Fig. 2 *Lambrequin and Peplum*, by Diane Simpson. 2017. Painted fibreboard, crayon on polyester and copper tacks, 276.9 by 127 by 78.7 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Tom Van Eynde; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

Elle Pérez is one of this Biennial's rising stars. Perez's photographic series of activities that push the body – including from facial feminisation surgery, the word 'DYKE' carved into someone's thigh, a hand holding a testosterone tube, alongside several subjects returning the camera's gaze defiantly – fuses portraiture with a millennial, Instagram-trained eye to put forward an effective revival of identity politics. The catalogue describes Pérez's photographs beautifully: 'they are reflections upon the failure of appearances to align with identity, imaging the beauty and truth found in those gaps and tensions' (p.294). Another young photographer known for queer self-awareness – slightly off the main space in a mustard painted corridor – John Edmonds, presents more classically sensual studio photographs, which question Black body objectivity and identity through object placement and composition.

Video and performance feel slightly relegated in this layout, and many works appear just once in the calendar of events, such as

Barbara Hammer's recent revision of *History Lessons* **FIG. 6**, made shortly before she died; Morgan Bassichi's comedy cabaret performance *Nibbling The Hand That Feeds Me*; and Blitz Bazawule's debut feature film *The Burial of Kojo* (2018). Only Carissa Rodriguez's unmissable film about the conditions of art production, *The Maid* (2018), is given substantial space in the main galleries, where it is installed as a large double-sided projection. Forensic Architecture have received plenty of press attention for their excellent exposé and admonishment of Whitney vice chair Warren B. Kanders. *Triple-Chaser* (2019) is a short film – (inexplicably) narrated by David Byrne – that explores Kanders's company Safariland, which provides ammunition to crisis zones.



Fig. 3 Installation view of the *Whitney Biennial 2019*, showing *PEOPLE LIKE US*, by Jeffrey Gibson. 2019. (Photograph Ron Amstutz; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

This highly curated version of America, one where all social concerns have their place, and nobody is left out, is surely to be celebrated. And yet, however well-intentioned the display is, something is a little too clean, a little too agreeable. The dream is to find a curatorial panacea for the nightmares of 2019, however the strategy of inclusion fails by reducing everything to a tidy and slick political art pageant. There is much to admire in the artists and artwork of this Whitney Biennial but deep down, for the curators, I think they know that the dream was never theirs.



Fig. 4 *Uh Oh, Look Who Got Wet*, by Janiva Ellis. 2019. Canvas, (Courtesy the artist; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).



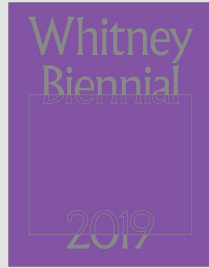
Fig. 5 *5825 NE 2nd Ave., Miami, FL 33137*, by Eddie Arroyo. 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 71.1 by 91.4 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Spinello Projects, Miami; photograph Eddie Arroyo; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).



Fig. 6 *History Lessons*, by Barbara Hammer. 2000. 16mm film. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

Exhibitions details Whitney Biennial 2019
Whitney Museum of American Art, New
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About this book



Whitney Biennial 2019
By Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta
Whitney Museum of American Art, New
York
978-0-300-24275-1

Footnotes

- 1** 'Revolutionary hope: A conversation between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde', *Essence* (December 1984), pp.72-74, 129-30 and 133. Available at <https://mocada-museum.tumblr.com/post/73421979421/revolutionary-hope-a-conversation-between-james>, accessed 8th June 2019. Harris-Babou's film can be viewed at <https://ilanahb.com/Finishing-a-Raw-Basement>, accessed 8th June 2019.
- 2** As quoted in N. Sajey: 'Whitney Biennial 2019: why is this year's show so safe?', *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/may/15/whitney-biennial-2019-why-is-this-years-show-so-safe>, accessed 8th June 2019.
- 3** See J. Panetta: 'Civic lessons: notable characteristics of America' in J. Panetta and R. Hockley, eds.: *Whitney Biennial 2019*, New York (Whitney Museum of American Art) 2019, p.104.
- 4** See R. Hockley: 'The end of the world or the beginning of the next', in J. Panetta and R. Hockley, eds.: *Whitney Biennial 2019*, New York (Whitney Museum of American Art) 2019, p.89.
- 5** Best exemplified by the 58th Venice Biennial (11 May-24th November 2019), curated by Ralph Rugoff. The central exhibition, *May You Live In Interesting Times*, concerns the current 'menacing times', and is set out as 'a decisive challenge to all oversimplifying attitudes'. The exhibition is unsuccessful, arguably through the slick presentation of socio-political work – including a large salvaged ship that sank only four years ago resulting in the deaths of eight hundred migrants – displayed for art audiences.
- 6** The biennial also extends to the outside spaces, a few pieces on Floor 1 and 3, a calendar of film and performance.

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